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ABSTRACT

Careful audience analysis should be a major focus of the rhetorical side of technical writing courses for university undergraduates. Student writers need to be taught to appreciate their readers' problems, interests, and motives. Most often, audience analysis is accomplished imaginatively--authors create mental images of their readers. Students can learn this by writing a short paper for an expert audience (defined by the student) about some problem, development, or new knowledge in their major field. Students are grouped by discipline and asked to imagine themselves as the intended readers while they respond to early drafts of these specialist papers. The result of these audience role playing sessions is that the authors get a sense of what a knowledgeable professional or expert audience can be expected to know, and what level of discourse is appropriate. They also learn how to demonstrate their competence to both fellow experts and their superiors through an executive review, for which authors present the essential findings of the specialist paper in a three-minute extemporaneous speech followed by five minutes of questions. Through these activities, many students learn about professional responsibility and realize how documents can function as more than vehicles for the exchange of information. (SRT)

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# PROFESSIONAL ROLES: INVENTING WRITERS FOR IMAGINED READERS

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# PROFESSIONAL ROLES: INVENTING WRITERS FOR IMAGINED READERS

George P. E. Meese

I'd like you to do a little mental exercise with me: imagine that you are a junior or senior undergraduate in a university that calls itself "technological." You are twenty-one. For the last two or three years, you have been grinding away at advanced mathematics, computer programming, a year of freshman writing, a few social sciences and humanities courses, chemistry, physics, materials science, and the like, and at present you are majoring in computers, or one of the sciences, or in a hot engineering field such as electronics. I realize this is an extravagant fantasy for many teachers of English, and considering how much math we'd have to learn, the fantasy could be painful.

There is a sweet side: as you continue to imagine what life is like for you as a modern undergraduate, don't forget the fact that you have at least four good job offers, and as soon as you graduate, you'll be making more than $25,000 at your first professional job. You hope to make your professional contribution in a corporation, the military, or a government agency. Ever since you began to dig into the subject-matter of your field, you have pictured yourself working as an engineer or scientist. In fact, your personal identification with your field has matured to the point that if someone would ask you what you do, you would say, "I'm an engineer!" or "I'm a scientist!"

**ABLE STUDENTS**

If you tried to project yourselves into the role I've described, you should have begun to appreciate my students' frame of reference. From my point of view, these students are sharp: intelectually ready for virtually any task that involves calculation, physical analysis, quantification, or measurement, and well-practiced at description of physical events and application of numerical routines to manipulate data. They like their major-field studies, especially in the junior and senior years, when they get to solve open-ended problems and work on projects that require original designs. They know a little about their history and culture, although they are by no means broadly read or liberally educated.

These students are not "bad" writers. In fact, they've already benefitted from three years of a university-wide "writing-across-the-curriculum" program that mandates writing-intensive course designs and pedagogy--many have learned the value of writing their own journals, including journals in their technical courses; most can construct decent paragraphs and reasonably coherent collegiate essays. They have learned well the rhetorical task of writing to please their teachers, and in some cases they've learned strategies to satisfy peer-critics in classes that use small-group or seminar techniques.

Why, then, are such able and accomplished students pulled away from their computer-assisted-design terminals, and trundled into a required course in Scientific and Technical Writing? You in the audience just imagined yourselves among them--wouldn't you wonder what my course was supposed to do for you?

**IMPORTANT LEARNING?**

I suppose, now that I have questioned the value of my course, that I should try to explain myself and show where the value lies. Pardon me if I come around the mountain to do so.

"Scientific and Technical Writing," to some teachers, means a course in the forms and formats of the workplace: memos, letters, proposals, reports, and so forth. I do teach students to use these forms, and I recognize the utility of giving students experience creating the conventional kinds of writing that get work done. I ask for efficient expression and display of information, and I want students to use ample white space on the page, make computer-graphics illustratons, put information into relatively short paragraphs with descriptive headings, and draw appropriate graphs and tables to present their data. I hope that they proofread meticulously, and care about their craftsmanship. All writing students, even the students who are accomplished academic writers when they enter my course, can benefit from adding these formal features to their repertoires.

I do not believe, however, that learning conventional formats justifies ten weeks of any student's work, especially in a so-called "advanced" writing course. All of us who keep in touch with the workplace know very well that the conventional formats vary from company to company and agency to agency, that they are among the easiest features of writing to teach, and that learning their particulars is probably best left to the first couple of weeks on the job, with the office style manual in hand. I will go even further: while some pragmatic objectives are met by studying formats and forms, there is precious little intellectual value in such an undertaking.

**PRIORITIES FOR INTELLECTUAL AND RHETORICAL GROWTH**

So what is more important? If I stopped talking right now, and asked you to write a memo that evaluated the way I began this presentation, what would you do? [Remember, I had you imagine yourself as an undergraduate in a technological university.] I daresay that any concerns over the format of your memo would take a back seat to more pressing issues. What if you knew that your memo would result in serious consequences for me--that it would either bless me or give me the ax? What if I told you that your memo would become part of your own promotion file, to document your ability to evaluate your subordinates? What if you knew that you were competing with a colleague to be selected for a management position, and you both were writing memos that would be compared by your seniors and that would bear on who gets selected? Of course, you would want to express your honest evaluation of my speech, but how, exactly, would you convey your judgment to different groups of readers, with differing interests in your opinion, and differing uses for the document you send to them?

Certainly the heart of the business in such situations is for the author to make sophisticated adjustments in his or her writing, so that the writer's personal integrity is maintained--the honest evaluation gets expressed--while at the same time the other exigencies of the situation are covered--you move into management, or win a raise, or I get the ax. To achieve your desired results in both the obvious and implicit dimensions of your task, you would necessarily have to be adept at what rhetoricians call "audience analysis" or "knowing your reader."

Careful audience analysis is so central to all professional writing that it should be a major focus of the rhetorical side of technical writing courses. Student writers need to be taught to appreciate their readers' problems, interests and motives if the writers are to influence them at all

successfully. Having said this, I recognize immediately that nearly all of us already teach audience analysis, so I am not concerned here with the general topic. What I want to focus upon is the students' conception of what audience analysis entails, and what they gain by doing it well.

The people in this room already have the prerequisite sensibilities and experience to do good audience analysis--we demonstrated this to each other when you responded so easily to my request that you imagine yourselves as students. Most of you found it easy to invoke an empathetic frame of mind and place yourselves in the other person's shoes. If we had expanded our exercise, some of you would have wanted to differentiate your roles more accurately, and ultimately we could have built up characters for each of you just as a dramatist or novelist depicts human motives, choices, and reactions in order to create believable fiction. As we did so, problems would crop up. While playing along, you might begin to feel that some of my generalizations about you, your attitudes toward your major field, and especially your writing ability were off the mark. Perhaps you would then imagine being a student who is not so sure of her mastery of engineering, or so lacking in confidence about his writing skills.

In any case, we who have extensive experience with literature, and who have learned to do thorough audience analysis as part of our writing, may underestimate just how foreign and how large a task it is for a neophyte writer to imagine a reader's point of view and then factor that point of view into an effective writing strategy. I know that my students, despite all of their technical expertise and apparent social maturity, simply do not know in advance how to tailor their ideas to specific readers in specific rhetorical situations. I base my conviction not only upon the self-centeredness of their rough drafts, which I expect, but also on what they write in their journal entries. Here is a journal entry that is typical of

responses to class discussions about readers:

> Today I learned that technical writing is creative. Trying to preconceive an audience to whom I will address a paper does take a lot of creative thinking. The basic question seems to be, "what will appeal to the audience I am addressing?" And audiences are inevitably people, and people are inevitably different. Therefore, as a technical writer, it is my job to figure out what is the unique thing about a particular audience. Sounds like I'm going to have to use my imagination.

**IMAGINING READERS**

The student I just quoted has made an important discovery: most often, audience analysis is accomplished imaginatively--authors create mental images of readers working their way through the text and responding. Experienced writers, ones who develop reputations for being "on target" most of the time, have refined their ability to imagine readers' responses with an accuracy that makes this acquired skill seem uncanny. I assume that these experts learned where to shoot by missing a few times, and by having readers give them appropriate feedback. Accordingly, I don't want my students to learn "audience analysis" abstractly, as something to be tallied on an author's checklist. I want them to imagine their readers, try some language in draft form, see how actual readers who are playing their assigned roles respond, and then adjust both the concept of the reader and the rhetoric of their next draft accordingly. Let me show you how an assignment runs under these objectives.

**THE "SPECIALIST" PAPER**

Students in my technical writing course have a lot more to do than write one assignment, and many tasks overlap one another--I've passed out

handouts that show the ten-week term in some detail. But for today's discussion I want to focus on what I've called the "specialist paper". This work makes up fully one-quarter of the course. The students get started with a proposal, negotiate their topics with me, and then work through several drafts before a final version is typed up for presentation and grading [Please refer to the handout with "Specialist Paper" at the head]:

> Proposal
>
> This document, in the form of an "internal" proposal addressed to Mr. Meese, will propose that you write a short paper about some problem, development, or new knowledge in your major field. You should convince him that you have the experience and motivation to write on the topic of your choice.
> This paper will occupy one-quarter of your work for the class; please select a topic that will 1)serve your learning in your field, 2)address an audience of knowledgeable professionals [please identify them specifically], 3)demonstrate your competence to write a 5-to-7-page technical paper without extraordinary research beyond what you have mastered in your degree program to date. The topic will be approved or negotiated upon return of your proposal.

The paper itself has these specifications:

> The Specialist Paper
>
> You will report what you know about some aspect of your field. Assume that you are writing for an expert audience (specified in your proposal). Use the respected journals of your field as guides to style, graphics, and documentation style, but give this report the form appropriate to your intended readers and distribution. Remember to provide emphasis, clear conclusions and recommendations that help the readers know what to do with the report and its information. Include a letter of transmittal and an informative abstract.

Please note that this is not a research paper. By using what the students already know fairly well about a technical or scientific issue, I can shift their attention to the rhetoric of its presentation. Part of this job involves role-playing: students are grouped by discipline and asked to imagine themselves as the intended readers while they respond orally and in writing to early drafts. The catch in this stage of the assignment is that the readers take on the roles imagined by the author, and then they behave

realistically in wanting a reasonable orientation to the subject, ample documentation, and purposeful recommendations. The readers quickly see themselves "on the readers' side" of these reports. Sometimes I am fortunate to have a student who has done co-op engineering or research, and she or he invariably becomes a class leader with anecdotes of how documents were exchanged and used in his or her work.

The result of these audience role-playing sessions is that the authors get a much better sense of what a "knowledgeable professional" or "expert audience" can be expected to know, and what level of discourse is appropriate to them. After a specialist-response workshop, a student wrote in her journal, "I was amazed by all the knowledge in different areas that my classmates possess. One thing I learned about my specialist paper is that I must anticipate questions, and allow for all angles of view from fellow specialists." She no longer held an amorphous, abstract notion of what fellow experts would want, and she could revise her draft with improved "aim" at her target readers. I think it is telling that she was "amazed" by her readers' sophistication and range of knowledge--she had witnessed, perhaps for the first time, her fellow students behaving as knowledgeable experts, with substantial opinions, stepping into the roles they are about to play in their first full-time professional jobs. And just as she saw classmates as budding professionals, she saw herself among them. This brings me to the other side of the rhetorical dimension of this assignment, the invention of writers.

**INVENTING WRITERS**

In the most recent edition of the journal, Technical Communication (31:4, fourth quarter 1984), Thomas E. Pearsall recommends that all writing assignments attend to the "role and purpose of the writer" among the five

major variables that students need to learn to assess any writing situation [writing activities, audience & purpose, the task, and format are the other four]. He says, "When possible, students should be asked to take the sorts of roles that they will one day play on the job. Salesperson, teacher, executive, technician, researcher, and consultant are some of the possibilities" (p. 23) Professor Pearsall is certainly one of the finest teachers of technical writing we have, and his course design is one I strongly endorse, but in this article he did not spell out exactly how a student is supposed to play one of these roles in a manner that bears on learning an effective writing strategy. One wag I had in class some years back, when asked to play the role of executive and write me a report, said, "my vice presidents prepare all my reports for my signature"--effective role playing, perhaps, but not what I anticipated or desired.

In my specialist paper assignment, writers must <u>invent</u> their own roles. Because the topics are selected from familiar and advanced material, and the students are on the verge of their first jobs but are still inexperienced, they readily project themselves into their fantasy vision of work. I am not satisfied with such projections, so I have introduced another workshop to keep them from idealizing their roles too much.

I call the workshop an "executive review", and it is timed to take place in class while the students are going from their first drafts of the specialist paper to second, third, and final drafts. For the executive review, each author must present the essential findings of the specialist paper in a three-minute extemporaneous speech followed by five minutes of questions. The catch here is that writers do not speak to the class as an academic assembly--instead, each writer must prepare four cards that define roles other students will play as they listen to the oral report. At least one role must be senior executive, another must be immediate supervisor; the

remainder are left to the writer. When the executive reviews are presented, classmates randomly fill in four chairs at a conference table, and the rest of the class observes the small-group in action. I keep the atmosphere as loose as possible, since the point is not to master the oral presentation, but to have the writer exercise in the role that is necessary to write a successful paper. In other words, I want the writers to feel themselves engaged, live, with others who might use the specialist report in a variety of ways that depend on their own job responsibilities.

Every time I run this workshop, I am reminded of the axiom about selection of Supreme Court justices: no selecting President can be certain how an individual is going to perform in their new role. Like presidents, the speakers discover that, once they give job descriptions to classmates to play out, the four listeners come up with all kinds of interesting questions, objections, criticism of blind spots, and wholly off-the-subject remarks. In short, the listeners behave like a group of skeptical superiors assembled to review what the new employee can do.

The writers take from this workshop experience, not a representation of the actual dynamics of office or laboratory politics, but instead a better sense of their rhetorical position as the well-trained and smart, but untested and inexperienced individual who is attempting to demonstrate competence both to fellow experts and to the boss. Seeing the other roles played out operates to differentiate the writer's role, helping writers understand that they have become the sole expert on the topic, and the sole source of information to others in the organization who need the information or ideas in their own jobs. Many of the students thus learn one aspect of professional responsiblity, and realize how some documents function as much more than vehicles for exchange of information.

**LEARNING**

One measure of intellectual growth is the ability to see relationships among ideas, actions, and conditions. I believe that the intellectual dimension of the course and the assignment I have been discussing is the set of relationships that are learned. One student, after doing his executive review, wrote in his journal, "Dr. Meese, after this class I realized that my oral script was inadequate--it was more a summary of my paper than the kind of action-oriented material executives need. I also need to reorganize my specialist paper before turning it in next week--I was still writing it like a research report for cell biology rather than a summary of promising research for my group [which is] investigating the production of monoclonal antibodies."

When a student achieves such insights, I believe the course has done its job. The students have advanced their rhetorical understanding and their knowledge of relationships between information and people who must use it. In other words, they have successfully invented writers for imagined readers.